

The Forum of Augustus: a family affair

Hannah Price

How does a young autocrat, adopted son of a man who had been assassinated, and victor in a bloody civil war, cement his power and secure his survival and legacy? Hannah Price looks at one way Augustus managed this – his new forum with its Temple to Mars Ultor. This was more than an overflow of the old Roman Forum. It was a manifesto.

On the 12th August, 2 B.C., Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, inaugurated the gleaming new temple dedicated to Mars. The Temple formed the centrepiece of Augustus' magnificent new Forum, described by a later Roman writer as one of the most beautiful buildings the world had ever seen. We can picture the scene: the Forum's open square packed with citizens, sweltering under a hot summer sky; the Roman Senate resplendent in white togas; and, prominently, Augustus' own family: among them his wife Livia, daughter Julia, and Julia's teenage sons Gaius and Lucius with their little brother Agrippa. To the crowd in the square the slight figure of the sixty-one-year-old Augustus on the temple steps was almost certainly less visible than the enormous, macho statue of the *princeps* ("First Citizen") in a four-horse chariot that stood in the centre of the open space.

The emperor is what the emperor builds

Why had Augustus chosen to build a new forum? After all, Rome already had two fora, one ancient, the other very new. And in both of these, Augustus made significant interventions. The Forum Iulium, which he completed, had been commissioned by his adopted father, Julius Caesar. It was joined to the ancient Forum Romanum, Rome's original civic square, where the Senate House, speaker's platform, and some of the oldest temples were located. But they were no longer large enough. The Romans traditionally held their law courts and business activities in and around the Forum Romanum, and, with the population booming, the city centre was running out of space. Augustus' new complex, linked to the Forum Iulium, added some much needed extra capacity.

Just as importantly, the beautiful new architecture, in all three fora, was an

opportunity for the princeps to send a message about himself and his rule to the people of Rome. Simply funding a new public facility was in and of itself a way to demonstrate his special love and care for the Roman people – and Augustus would brag that he had found the city made of brick and left it made of marble. More than that, though, the Augustan Forum's carefully-curated decorative schemes could express his vision for Rome more successfully than the old Roman Forum. That space was crammed with monuments, statues, and memories going back to the foundation of the city, set up by many different aristocratic families during the Roman Republic. Too many of those buildings had witnessed a brutal past that Augustus worked very hard to obscure: the fact that, forty years ago, he had seized autocratic control over the Empire in a bloody civil war. The speaker's platform, for example, had been used by the young Augustus and his allies for a gory display of the butchered corpses of the senators who opposed them – including the head and hands of the orator Cicero. There were older myths too, about the city's early days, which explained why the Romans so bitterly hated the idea of a monarchy. Inconvenient parallels might be drawn.

Looking to the future

The new forum was essentially a fresh start, a blank canvas onto which Augustus' architects and designers were able to project any message they wished, and Augustus transferred many civic functions from the old forum to it. One of the major justifications for his remaining as sole ruler was that he alone had been able to secure peace for the Roman world. Even his opponents had to acknowledge that by 2 B.C. the *pax Augusta* ('Augustan peace') had endured for decades. Given this, Mars, the god of war, seems an

unlikely figure to honour with a new temple. When the poet Ovid described the temple's dedication, he imagined Mars' massive bulk descending from heaven with a din of clashing weapons so terrifying the stars fled from the sky. Who would welcome the return of the war god to Rome? Almost all the older people in the crowd would have known a relative or friend lost in the conflict. The temple was dedicated to Mars in his capacity as *Ultor* ('the Avenger'), which associated it even more firmly with the Civil Wars. For Ovid, it referred to Augustus' vow to avenge Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C. by a conspiracy of senators led by Brutus and Cassius. Given that Augustus' successful policy since establishing his regime had always been to show his respect for the Senate and its traditions, it was an odd memory to stir up forty years after the event.

It's the family connection, however, that's the key to understanding the new forum and its temple. The base of Augustus' statue was inscribed: *PATER PATRIAE* ('Father of the Nation'). This was a title recently bestowed on the *princeps* by the Senate. Augustus is celebrated in his forum not as magistrate, emperor, or king, or even as 'first citizen', but as a father to his people. It was, in essence, a new way to conceptualize his authority: benevolent, appropriately stern, and all-encompassing. This great general in his chariot would protect Rome with a father's love. To our eyes, as perhaps to some of the citizens in the crowd, it may seem rather benign, even cuddly; perhaps Augustus was retreating from formal expressions of political authority. But this is deceptive. In the Forum of Augustus we see Augustus' regime consolidating its position. It was no longer built around the *princeps* alone, as a response to the crisis of the civil wars. The monarchy was now portrayed as a dynastic affair with a past and future. The Forum of Augustus' decorative programme, therefore, blends the history and destiny of Rome with that of the Julian family.

Keeping it in the family

We can reconstruct something of the

forum's appearance by putting the archaeological remains together with descriptions in ancient literature, and evidence from other cities in the Empire. In Mars' temple the cult statue of the god was flanked by Venus, the goddess of love, and Caesar, who had been made a god after his death. Both Mars and Venus were believed to be ancestors of the Roman people: Mars, the father of Romulus, the founder of Rome, and Venus as the mother of Aeneas, who had brought the Romans' ancestors, the Trojans, to Italy. But, of course, they were not just the Romans' ancestors (figuratively speaking), but specifically Augustus' own. The family of Julius Caesar, who had adopted Augustus as his heir, claimed Iulus, Aeneas' son, as their forefather. The deified Caesar joined a family gathering. In keeping with the intergenerational theme, a statue group of Iulus, his father Aeneas, and Aeneas' father Anchises stood in the left-hand *exedra* (apse) behind the colonnade that flanked the temple. It was a truly daring arrangement that promoted Augustus, like Aeneas and Romulus, into the ranks of the semi-divine. The distance between the Father of the Nation in his chariot and the gods was just a few metres, and a single generation.

There's an obvious comparison to be made here with Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which the Trojan origins of the Julian family and of Rome itself are inextricably linked. The forum continues the story where Virgil stops. The Iulus group was but one of the sculptures to occupy the left-hand apse and its pair opposite. With it were members of the Julian family and Iulus' descendants, the Kings of Alba Longa; on the other side, the Kings of Rome followed by celebrated heroes from Rome's history. Placing the quarrelsome heroes of the Republic side by side, this 'hall of fame' stressed peace and concord, and the idea that Rome's destiny had been safeguarded by a series of benevolent monarchs. Take the hint? The forum's design blended myth and history, family and politics, and created a heightened atmosphere in which the deeply radical (the inclusion of Caesar alongside Venus and Mars, the ranking of Augustus with Romulus and Aeneas) seemed the natural order of things.

Against this backdrop, Augustus' war of revenge against Caesar's assassins appears to be not just epic but irreproachable. Brutus and Cassius had tried to hinder the Julian family's destiny – and paid the rightful price. Caesar had been struck down only to become more powerful than his assassins could possibly have imagined – a god. Mars Ultor was not a god of civil war, but guaranteed a familial devotion that Augustus, the Father of the Nation, now extended to all of Rome. The cumulative effect, then, was to concentrate centuries of Roman history and

Julian destiny onto the family now present in the new Forum – Augustus, and his daughter's children Gaius and Lucius Caesar.

In August 2 B.C. Gaius was eighteen years old, and Lucius fifteen. Augustus had adopted them as his own sons, and they were his great hopes for the future of the dynasty. They played a prominent role in the festivities, presiding over games in the Circus (260 lions and 36 crocodiles were slaughtered). Their little brother, ten-year-old Agrippa, took part in the Troy Game. This traditional equestrian display was said by Virgil (in *Aeneid* 5) to go back to the funeral of Anchises: Agrippa was taking the part of Iulus. If the Forum's statuary represented Rome's past, and Augustus the present, these boys were 'hope springs eternal'.

The Forum's rhetoric is so powerful that it's easy to forget that it was not entirely a success. Augustus' investment in his family proved a risky strategy: he might be able to control the past, but he could not control the future. And, as later Roman authors would snigger, although he was Father of the Nation he could not control his own offspring. Later in the same year, his daughter Julia was involved in a scandal. Augustus exiled her to a tiny island off the coast of Italy, a punishment so severe that scholars have suspected she was involved in a political conspiracy. Within four years, Gaius and Lucius were dead, probably of natural causes. Although the principate established by Augustus would last for centuries, when he died in A.D. 14 he was succeeded by his stepson, Tiberius Claudius Nero – not strictly a member of the Julian family at all and a reluctant and slippery emperor.

If you want to find out more about the Forum of Augustus, you could do worse than consult Paul Zanker's classic book, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (translated from the German in 1988).

Hannah Price has recently completed a doctorate on the Roman Forum. She studied in Cambridge and is now working in the University's Museum of Classical Archaeology.